

A still from the movie E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial showing the alien's head peeking out from behind a white door. The alien has large, expressive eyes and a small mouth. The door has a brass doorknob and a white light switch. The background is a dark blue wall.

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E.T. RETURNS!

How a plastic alien changed
cinematic history forever...

ALIEN

RESURRECTION



Twenty years after its release, a new version of *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* is in cinemas. Join us as we pay homage to a sci-fi classic that is still worth phoning home about...

WORDS IAN FREER

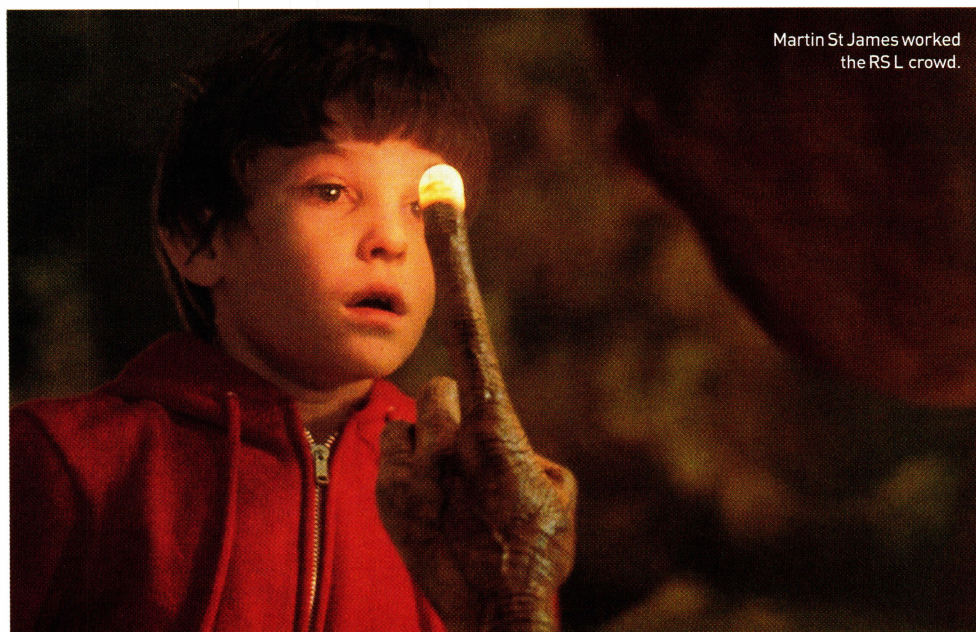
Whatever mistakes you may have made in your working life, just be thankful you are not Marvin Antonowsky. In 1980, Antonowsky, as the head of

Columbia studio's marketing and research department, was charged with the job of looking over a Melissa Mathison script called *E.T. And Me* which Steven Spielberg had been developing at the studio. After a series of demographic surveys and focus groups, Antonowsky concluded that *E.T. And Me* had a limited commercial appeal, restricted only to the "juvenile" sector of the audience. So when Antonowsky expressed his reservations to Columbia president Frank Price, Price immediately put the project into turnaround and in so doing waved goodbye to a \$US701 million worldwide hit (*E.T.* remains Spielberg's biggest US hit, with a gross of \$399.8 million), spin-off opportunities a-go-go and one of cinema's most deeply cherished experiences. Oh, Marvin, how do you sleep at night?

To be fair, Antonowsky's decision looked eminently sensible at the time. Spielberg was still in production on *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, meaning his last film on release was the frowned-upon 1941. *E.T.* boasted no stars and the whiff of live-action Disney – suggesting a \$35-40 million gross – pervaded the entire enterprise. And, despite subsequently displaying all the accoutrements of the full-blown blockbuster – half-mile lines around the block, jokes on *The Tonight Show*, pirate video status – everything about *E.T.* felt small: small budget (\$11.5 million), small setting (for the most part, a suburban closet), small title star (under one metre) probably translated as small fiscal returns. Twenty years on, it remains the most unpretentious, unassuming movie ever to sit atop the all-time box-office premier league, an intimate slice of sci-fi-as-autobiography that, through storytelling lucidity and irresistible emotional directness, blithely wandered into the numero uno slot.



Midget President would start the World Series.



Martin St James worked the RSL crowd.

When industry analysts looked at the summer of 1982, there was little buzz on *E.T.* Besides, there was much more heavyweight competition around: sequels aplenty (*Rocky III*, *Grease 2*, *Star Trek II*), dark science fiction (*Blade Runner*, *The Road Warrior*, John Carpenter's *The Thing*), big-budget musicals (*Annie*, *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*) and new

flicks from Robin Williams (*The World According To Garp*), Clint Eastwood (*Firefox*) and Woody Allen (*A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*). Even the Spielberg-produced *Poltergeist*, all slick suburban scares and spectres, looked a more promising bet for a big hit than an idealised love story between a grumpy kid and a squat alien.

Still the lack of anticipation surrounding *E.T.* proved to be the film's secret weapon. Perhaps Spielberg's canniest move in releasing the film was the complete silence surrounding the production. Famously made under the working title of *This Boy's Life* – described as “a comedy about antics and lifestyles of boys living in Southern California” – and with a watertight “closed set” policy meaning no one could snatch an illicit picture of the star, the only thing that would have kept *E.T.* on any movie pundit's radar was Spielberg's involvement. Cast and crew signed confidentiality agreements meaning that they could not talk to the press. Even the poster artists who created the film's enigmatic, iconic artwork – a Michelangelo-esque touching of fingers between Elliot and E.T. – were not allowed to see any clips of the film: they worked solely from Spielberg's directions. The upside of this clandestine approach was that the first wave of US audiences who saw it had the real feeling that they were discovering the film for themselves.

“I had two main worries about *E.T.*,” said Spielberg shortly after the film's release. “My first worry was that it would suffer from the *Bambi* curse and would not appeal to the 18-55 age bracket. The other thing was that I had decided to let E.T. appear on all these magazine covers. And when I saw E.T.'s face in full colour on all the magazine racks, I was terrified, because I was afraid his looks would put people off to the point where they wouldn't give the film a chance.”

Spielberg's anxieties must have been heightened in that *E.T.* was his most personal film. After being overwhelmed by *1941* and doing hired-hand work on *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, he was about to wear his heart on his bomber jacket sleeve with a yarn ripped from the fabric of his own life – the stakes could not be any higher. But, if the director had any doubts, they must have been seriously soothed by the film's first public preview. With the screening taking place in Honolulu, all the Universal brass were in



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UNIVERSAL'S PRESIDENT, SID SHEINBERG



attendance, including studio president and Spielberg mentor Sid Sheinberg. If there was any air of tension as the auditoria filled up, it soon dissipated when the film began casting its benevolent spell.

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Spielberg's next confirmation that he had something unique came from an unlikely source – that bastion of impenetrable Euro fare, the Cannes Film Festival. Spielberg, returning to the festival for the first time since his 1974 debut *The Sugarland Express*, was invited to show the film as the closing night gala. “When the film is over,” wrote film critic Roger Ebert at the time, “the audience rises *en masse* and turns and shouts its approval and cheers Spielberg, who sits in the front row of the balcony and stands up with a silly grin on his face.” Indeed, the Cannes *joie de vivre* even spilled over into his press conference as Spielberg discussed his autobiographical relationship to the material.

Question: When did you lose your innocence?

Spielberg: How do I answer that question [*pause*]? It was in a place called the Holiday Inn motel [*laughs*]. With an extraterrestrial creature [*laughs*].

Despite the growing feeling that Spielberg was onto something potentially huge, *E.T.* was allowed to build and gradually wheedle its way into people's hearts. Two weeks before opening, Universal began a program of 450 preview screenings up and down the US that unveiled Spielberg's baby. Like all the best secrets, *E.T.* was far too enthralling to keep quiet, and the word of mouth spread like wildfire. While stellar early reviews played a big part – "It's a dream of a movie, a bliss-out," gushed Pauline Kael – the importance of audiences, sharing and talking about the experience cannot be underestimated in *E.T.*'s success.

Without the pressure of today's flicks to secure the biggest opening weekend ever, *E.T.* opened on 11 June 1982 on a relatively small 1100 screens, grossing an impressive \$11.8 million, and then moved out onto some 600 more screens throughout the summer. What happened then was every studio accountant's dream: reversing the typical trend of diminishing returns, *E.T.* made \$12.4 million over the first week, \$12.8 on the second and \$14 million the third. In fact, *E.T.*, didn't start to slow down until week five. Two months after opening, it continued to out-gross films that were just opening – three months into its wide release, it was still earning an average of \$13 million a week. Some four months after its premiere, it was still among the top-four-grossing films of the week. While the likes of *Jaws*, *Star Wars* and *Raiders* took at least a year to accrue their impressive receipts, *E.T.* made \$200 million in 66 days, and that was solely on a US release.

To underline the stats, few flicks have penetrated the culture like *E.T.* Newspaper cartoons, television skits and department store windows were all dominated by the bug-eyed fella. Just six weeks after its release, the hospital comedy *Young Doctors In Love* featured a "Phone home" gag dubbed onto the hospital's PA system. Neil Diamond recorded a dreadful ballad, *Turn On Your Heartlight* (after *E.T.*'s glowing chest!) and Michael Jackson, who "met" the Carlo Rambaldi puppet at a photo shoot, warbled *Someone In The Dark* on the *E.T. Storybook* album. "He was so real that I was talking to him," quoth Jacko. "I kissed him before I left. The next day, I missed him."

In a reciprocal relationship, the initial success of the film fuelled the culture and the culture fuelled the continued success of the film. *E.T.* became the subject of all sorts of editorial commentary and theories in the way that only mega-hits do, from the



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environmentalists who saw the book-ending forest sequences as a plea for preservation of the redwoods to the American religious belt who read *E.T.* as a thinly veiled version of the Christ story (ie arrives in a barn, has a healing touch and a glowing heart, persecuted by civil

authorities, dies, then is resurrected). Taking the opposite tack, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart called *E.T.* "a beast from hell" and Spielberg "an agent of Satan". Wanker.

An outgrowth of the film's unparalleled popularity was a massive merchandising



push. Despite Spielberg's desire to preserve the purity of his alien, MCA-Universal quickly licensed around 200 merchandising spin-offs

– dolls, lunch boxes, green ice-cream, speak'n'spells and a new-fangled Atari video game – in order to

counteract the tidal wave of bootleg items that had flooded the market. If

some of the bogus merchandise was in poor taste – a record entitled *I Had Sex*

With E.T. – some of the “official” products were hardly much better (women's underwear with E.T.'s face stitched into the crotch). However, the hoped-

for *Star Wars*-esque merchandising bonanza never really materialised; the E.T. Earth Center toy marquee at Universal Studios shut up shop after only five weeks.

Indeed, if E.T. garnered any sort of backlash it was over this perceived sense of exploitation. As Michael Ventura wrote in *LA Weekly*, “Spielberg turned his film into a toy factory, trivialising the movie almost beyond recognition.” Many feel that the proliferation of merchandising tarnished the idea of *E.T.* as a perfectly formed gem and hurt Spielberg's chances at the Academy Awards: *E.T.* grabbed four out of its nine nominations, missing out on Best Picture and Best Director to Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*. Spielberg later, by the end of its run, admitted that *E.T.* had “become a much-abused icon.”



Alphabet Soup

The A-Z (almost) of acronym titles.

A.I. – Spielberg again, but it wasn't a patch on *E.T.* It means “Artificial Intelligence”.

B.A.P.S. – Halle Berry vehicle. The title refers to Black American Princesses. Or does it?

C.B.4 – Middle-class dudes form hard-core rap crew of title. Means Cell Block 4.

D.O.A. – Two versions of a tale that has man trying to find out who gave him poison.

F.M. – Cool '70s comedy about a radio station. It means Frequency Modulation.

M*A*S*H – Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. Sucking chest wounds and dry martinis.

P.C.U. – Campus comedy set at Port Chester University where political correctness rules.

S.F.W. – Awful grunge film has Stephen Dorff as Cliff Spab. His motto? “So Fucking What?”

Z.P.G. – Sci-fi clunker in which the government aims for Zero Population Growth and reproduction is punishable by death!



Reunions:
awkward

Perhaps too delicate a trick to pull off twice, plans for an *E.T.* sequel never got off the drawing board. Spielberg and Melissa Mathison thrashed out an idea entitled *E.T. II: Nocturnal Fears*, which saw Elliot and friends kidnapped by evil aliens and E.T. mounting a rescue mission, but Spielberg ultimately decided he did not want to “rob the original of its virginity.”

As a bizarre postscript, Columbia's initial development of the project meant that the studio was entitled to five per cent of the film's gross. Meaning that *E.T.* became Columbia's biggest hit of the year without really being a Columbia film. Which might have provided a morsel of solace for poor Marvin Antonowsky.

◆ *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial The 20th Anniversary Special Edition* is out now and is reviewed on page 44.